Memoirs of a Geisha

Reviewed by Becka O’Neil

I read Memoirs of a Geisha by Arthur Golden. It takes place in Japan over the lifetime of Chiyo, a young girl on the path of being a geisha. It starts with her life in the small fishing village of Yoroido, where her mother is ill and her father is busy. She meets a man who takes her to a train station where she is put in the care of another man who brings her to the Nitta Okiya in Gion, the geisha district of Kyoto.

Once in Kyoto, she works as a maid in the okiya with her friend Pumpkin. Finally, Chiyo is told she can begin lessons at the school to become a geisha. She begins classes, but nothing can stop her from trying to find her sister, who was also taken away from their home.

Hatsumomo, the geisha who lives in the okiya, mocks Chiyo, telling her that she knows where Chiyo’s sister is, but refusing to tell her without payment. When the day finally comes for Chiyo to pay, Hatsumomo makes her write on a beautiful kimono belonging to a rival geisha, Mameha. Chiyo then has to return it.

Hatsumomo gives a vague clue as to where Chiyo’s sister is, but it’s enough for Chiyo to sneak out and find her sister. They make plans to run away together, meeting at a place on the river. Chiyo returns, but Ms. Nitta catches Hatsumomo with her boyfriend so the doors to the okiya are now constantly locked. Chiyo decides to take the alternate route by going out a window to the roof. She slips in the end and breaks her arm.

As a consequence, Chiyo isn’t allowed to continue geisha training. She spends her time as a maid in the okiya, cleaning and running errands. On one particular outing, a man sees her crying and comforts her. He gives her money wrapped in his handkerchief along with the motivation she needs to become a geisha.

Somewhere along the way, Mameha decides to help Chiyo. She makes a bet with Ms. Nitta that Chiyo will pay off her debt before she turns twenty. Almost instantly, Chiyo is back in school and training harder than ever. Mameha and Chiyo become sisters, and Chiyo takes a new name: Sayuri.

Memoirs of a Geisha is a great book, full of intrigue and destiny. It has a twisting plot, and I would recommend it to any girl looking for a lengthier novel. It may be a bit awkward for boys to read, but overall it’s enjoyable for anyone.